

## Geneva Conference (2017) for Relieving Yemen: between the hopes and the complex reality

Dr. Moosa Elayah<sup>1</sup>  
[m.elayah@maw.ru.nl](mailto:m.elayah@maw.ru.nl)

Dr. Bilqis Abu-Osba<sup>2</sup>  
[B.abuosba@gmail.com](mailto:B.abuosba@gmail.com)

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<sup>1</sup>Dr. Elayah, Vice-Chair person of AWAM, is a Senior Scholar and Expert in Development and Peacebuilding, at the Political Sciences Department, Sanaa University, Yemen and at the Centre for International Development Issues Nijmegen (CIDIN), the Netherlands. He is knowledgeable of the political issues in the MENA region. He has a keen sense of international relations and development challenges in the region and specializes in governance issues on the Arabian peninsula. He is particularly well-informed about the case of Yemen and has a strong thematic expertise on public sector reform in a developing country context. He conducted his Ph.D. research on institutional reform and, particularly, the role of international donors in fostering democratization and public sector reforms in developing countries. In this study, he used a methodological approach to analyze the European Union's development and foreign policies, in particular Dutch aid policies. He focused on Yemen but also looked at many examples of other developing countries. Since his PhD work, he shifted his research focuses to the role of donors in promoting NGOs, women and youth for peace building within the Arab Spring countries.

<sup>2</sup>Dr. Abu-Osba, Chairperson of AWAM, is professor of Gender and politics at the political sciences department and the Gender Studies Center, Sanaa, university, Yemen. Her expertise concerns the role of civil society in empowering ordinary citizens in Yemen. She played a key role in establishing several women's networks and alliances in order for women leaders, especially youth, to be able to fight for their rights during the transition period Yemen is passing through. She chaired various lobby and advocacy events with leading local NGOs/CSOs to make women's voices heard inside and outside Yemen.

## **The Complex Reality**

Humanitarian assistance entails a moral commitment by the international community to support peoples at risk and who suffer from sudden emergencies as a result of natural disasters, wars and conflicts, and who require ongoing aid to sustain their lives or improve their quality of life. Yemen, a country located in the south of the Arabian Peninsula, is suffering from the scourge of hunger and starvation as a result of decades of wars and conflicts. March 26, 2017, was the second anniversary of the military intervention of the Saudi-led alliance in Yemen to demolish the power of Al-Houthi guerrilla movement. On September 21, 2014, Al-Houthi seized power in Yemen, in alliance with ex-Yemeni President Ali Saleh and with Iranian military logistical and training help. Until now, the Saudi-led alliance could not resolve the battle and force the Houthi Salhi factions to come to the negotiating table at the very least. Currently, the war in Yemen is under the umbrella of the Iran-Saudi ongoing conflict in the Middle East, which is exacerbating the pace of fighting and the seriousness of the humanitarian situation.

The fighting on the ground is between the forces loyal to President Abdulrabu Mansour Hadi, supported by the Saudi-led alliance and the militias of the Houthi guerrilla movement and its allied forces of Saleh on one hand, and the air strikes by the Saudi-led alliance on the other hand. The main result of this fighting is that more than three million people have been displaced, and seven million people do not know where their next meal is coming from. The conflict in Yemen is devastating with the collapse of the basic services and the forced displacement. 69% of the country's war-ravaged population is food insecure, and almost 90% of the population needs different forms of humanitarian assistance.

The United Nations has warned that one-third of Yemen's 22 provinces are on the verge of famine. An estimated 18.8 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance or protection assistance, including 10.3 million people who urgently need immediate assistance to save their lives from death due to famine and severe food insecurity. About 3.3 million children and pregnant women or nursing mothers are suffering from acute malnutrition, including 462,000 children under five. According to UN sources, more than 63. 000 Yemeni children have died or were killed by the war

and things that could be overcome, such as famine and malnutrition. Every ten minutes, one child under five dies. The United Nations says more than 10,550 people - mostly civilians - have been killed and nearly 57,000 injured during this severe war.<sup>3</sup> Nearly 4 million people now lack safe drinking water or sanitation, and 8.2 million people are in dire need of such basic services. An estimated 14.8 million people lack access to basic healthcare, with 8.8 million people living in severely affected areas. There are about 2 million children out of school, and about 3,000 schools are closed to students and educational processes, because of the damages or their occupation by displaced civilians or combatants from all conflicted factions. About 2 million children are not registered in school at all.

### **The Humanitarian Response Plan of 2017: Illusion in a complex human reality**

As a result of this alarming humanitarian situation, on 26 April 2017, the United Nations organized a joint Swiss-Swedish co-sponsored relief conference for Yemen, following on from the UN Humanitarian Response Plan of 2017, which sought funding of \$ 2.1 billion to assist 12 million people in Yemen and 7% of relief needs. However, the countries participating in the donors' conference to support Yemen in Geneva pledged only 1.1 billion US dollars out of the two billion necessary to support the country's relief efforts as it was announced by the UN. The initial pledges included \$ 150 million from Saudi Arabia, \$ 100 million from the UAE, Kuwait with \$100 million, individual EU states with \$ 123 million, and the United States with \$ 94 million.

The observer can imagine that the humanitarian response plan in Yemen for 2017 is a fruitful idea on the right track to increase the effectiveness of international humanitarian assistance and to unify and coordinate the efforts of international donor organizations in this troubled country. However, one can argue that Geneva conference is an illusion in a complex human reality that is not only governed by total pledges and the amount of international humanitarian sympathy with Yemen, but also by other factors that will lead to ineffective humanitarian aid.

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<sup>3</sup> These statistics are inaccurate as a result of several factors: most of the population of Yemen lives in rural areas and most of these areas suffer from a complete lack of infrastructure of communication, transportation and health centers, making it difficult to communicate information and to monitor, especially the reality of deaths among children under the age of five as a result of hunger and famine. There is also a cultural factor in the Yemeni tribal community: fear of social shame and lack of dignity. Deaths have not been reported due to hunger. Thus, the numbers mentioned above are approximate and need to be reviewed, and the actual number of casualties may be up to ten times higher.

The Humanitarian Response Plan of 2017 is not clear and its preparation was not effective, as it was not designed according to comprehensive studies and information that effectively reflects Yemeni reality. On the contrary, it has relied mainly on, and worked in partnership with, some of the civil society organizations that are not effective and have no social and political legitimacy or community acceptance, and lack sufficient capacity to reach all segments of the Yemeni society. The United Nations and other donors do not have realistic humanitarian aid policies and studies that reflect the Yemeni reality; they operate randomly without coordination or harmonization. Donors have clearly contributed to the elimination of transparency and lack of accountability as we find that donors help to increase corruption among the civil society organizations and reduce the social control of CSOs' work. Under the pretext of the sensitivity of information and the threat to civil society organizations, donors often do not announce the amount of funding for projects implemented through civil partnership or clarify the names of those involved, as they state that they do not want to make them vulnerable to the conflicting factions. Despite the important role that civil society organizations are expected to play in light of the changes after the Arab Spring, the facts indicate that these organizations are melting into the sea of corruption. Financial transparency does not exist in the accounts of these organizations, although many clearly indicate in their internal systems and policies the importance of the role of transparency in annual financial reports. Each organization has its secret and hidden doors for corruption, even for its own employees. It is no secret that these organizations have delusive boards of directors, and lack non-management or society members.

In an unpublished academic article (2016) entitled "Why do national NGOs go where they go? The case of Yemen," researchers Elayah and Schulpen from Radboud University in the Netherlands found that most civil society organizations exist in places where international organizations exist within the country, in order to seek external funding. Put differently: in Yemen, needs factors (e.g., the poverty situation in a governorate) do not play a role, or even point in the opposite direction than expected. It is rare to find one NGO working in the areas where there is extreme poverty and

starvation. In the wake of the Arab Spring, thousands of NGOs have been registered in state records, but thousands more have chosen not to register yet are still working in the (civil) field. In 2014, the World Bank reported that, besides the 8,817 registered civil society organizations, there were more than 6,000 other civil society organizations [...] estimated to operate without registration. The total number of non-governmental organizations or civil society organizations in Yemen reached about 15,000 in 2015, of which over 40% are not officially registered.

The Humanitarian Response Plan of 2017 for Yemen did not include clear operational mechanisms and guarantees by conflicting factions not to impose restrictions on the movement of the humanitarian assistance. The complexities of the conflicting factions on the ground and their acquisition of most of the aid earmarked for the poor are two of the main factors that have increased the pace of human suffering in Yemen. It is not unusual to find some relief items sold at fictional prices in the black markets spread across different Yemeni regions, or by agents and sympathizers of all conflicting factions. The money made from the sold relief items is normally used to finance armed operations and paying fighters as well as recruiting children in absurd wars and conflicts.

The Saudi-led alliance blockade, which aims to cut off arms supplies to the Houthis from Iran, is increasing the humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen, as it is impeding the implementation of the humanitarian response plan. Commercial goods are almost banned from entering Yemen, and the country as a whole is dependent on imports for about 90% of its basic food needs. When some relief organizations were allowed to enter Yemen, they faced lengthy security complications from the Saudi led-alliance, which lead to the damage of relief materials in the security checkpoints by the sea. In most cases, humanitarian aid items in Yemen are not usable or valid for humanitarian purposes as they have expired and would bring more health complications than hunger and famine. All of this is channeled through the World Food Program of the United Nations, which proves its failure to manage global humanitarian crises and disasters.

It appears that the total pledges do not reach the required level of relief for a completely devastated society of 27 million people, as described in the Humanitarian Response Plan 2017. The requested figure could exceed 15 billion dollars according to statistics prepared by the researchers in a paper on the possibility of overcoming the humanitarian disaster in Yemen. This is in addition to the increasing cost of delivering aid to the most affected groups. More than 70 humanitarian organizations are working to help those in need in Yemen. This is a large number of actors that requires large operating expenses. The United Nations itself has the highest operating expenses, which will exceed 40% of the total allocated amounts for humanitarian response in Yemen. Access restrictions, damaged infrastructure, lack of access to fuel, and lack of funding are all factors that will increase the amount of operational bills and even hamper the relief efforts as a whole.

On the eve of the conference, the United Nations' organizations operating in Yemen announced their needs. The World Food Program announced its needed one billion dollars, while the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) said it required 236 million dollars. The World Health Organization declared that it needed 322 million dollars. It appears that the funds and pledges of the Geneva Conference 2017 for Yemen will be shared among these multilateral international organizations, who see their work as a priority. As usual, most donor countries are reluctant to pay their pledges for helping Yemen, as it had been the case at previous donor conferences for Yemen. In a study on the effectiveness of international aid in Yemen, Elayah (2014) found that the amounts pledged by donors at the London donors' conference for Yemen in 2006 were pledged again at the donors' conference for Yemen in London 2010. The total amount which actually granted between the above-mentioned conferences was not more than 12.5% of the total donor commitments (6.8 billion USD).

### **Balancing relief efforts with the complex humanitarian situation**

In order to design an effective plan for humanitarian response and alleviation of famine in Yemen, this paper's main recommendation is the need to conduct a comprehensive study of the local reality and its various complexities. This study should be based on many questions, which must be answered systematically. These questions, which were missing from the Humanitarian Response Plan of 2017, include

the following: What type of relief program should there be? What kind of criteria should be used (e.g. political, economic, humanitarian) for the selection process of the type of relief program? At which level the relief program should be placed (national, provincial, local)? What should the selection process be for targeting areas in order of priority? According to the most affected areas, according to the most needy areas, or all areas will be treated equally? What are the most targeted groups of the relief program? Are they the most needy groups in society? Or will there be a qualitative study of the different groups? Who will be the targeted groups (children, women), and are these a priority? What should be the role of women and civil society organizations in the relief program? What kind of management structure should the relief program have? What about the local capacities to manage such a relief program? How can we overcome the logistical challenges? How can we overcome the security challenges for the relief teams? What about the role of the conflicting factions in the relief program? And the role of regional powers and actors, and international actors? How much financial aid is required for the whole relief program? Who is going to fund it, i.e. who are the main donors of the relief program?

The Geneva conference 2017 for Yemen may have highlighted some of the side effects of the Yemeni crisis and some humanitarian relief needs, but it is an international declaration of failure to address the main dilemma of Yemen. So far, the international community have not been able to approach the conflicting factions to have serious negotiations and to agree on a comprehensive political solution that would stop the war and bloodshed in Yemen.